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ABSTRACT

This short essay along with workshop materials outlines constructive ways for Humanities teachers to stimulate discussions on religion. The activities and procedures are based on the author's own experience and philosophy. Student centered discussions are effective and less risky for engaging in religious issues. Student discussions also are the best way to involve students who feel threatened by religious subjects and to take advantage of the many religious beliefs shared by students. General procedures for getting religious discussions started are to encourage participation by way of "I-statements"; have a plan of topics to discuss beforehand; ask open-ended questions; validate positions; rationalize; reason and always promote respectful and civil dialogue as both a personal and historical topic. A sample template for discussions, sample activities, and discussion questions are included. Contains 13 references. (JAG)

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Valencia Community College
CCHA National Conference
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Speaking of Faith: Eliciting and Enriching Student Discussions of Religion

by
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Valencia Community College
CCHA National Conference, 1995

I have often heard colleagues express wariness about discussing religious topics in their Humanities classrooms. We all imagine some horrible scenario in which religious war breaks out before our eyes or our class becomes fodder in a Supreme Court ruling.

Yet religious topics have the power to mobilize powerful feelings, to touch the deepest convictions of our students and ourselves, to affect our students' thinking in profound ways. Religion is such powerful stuff because we care about it so powerfully. And people in America care about it more than people in any other Western country. To avoid or discount religion in our classroom is falsifying the history of civilization and the values of our students. And to teach it in a detached way is wasting some powerful energy that could be use to motivate learning.

In this short essay and the accompanying workshop materials, I want to outline some constructive ways of stimulating discussions of religion. All these activities and strategies are based on my own experience and a straightforward philosophy: that guided, student--centered discussion is the most effective and least risky means of engaging these issues. Student discussions are also the best way to involve students who feel threatened by religious subjects and to take advantage of the many religious beliefs shared by our students.

Ground Rules

It's best to have established some discussion ground rules in the classroom that will make any discussion clearer, less threatening, and richer in student involvement.

- *Encourage "I"-statements from students:* Encourage students to couch all their statements in terms of "I believe ...", "I learned...", "I heard you saying...," etc.

- *Use and encourage facilitative responses:* Respond to student contributions with facilitative responses that support their risk-taking and focus on their feelings. Emphasize the importance of voicing convictions and listening empathetically to each other's thoughts (see "Facilitative Response" attachment).

- *Insist that every opinion has the right to be heard:* Require that every student contribution be heard through to the end, without interruption. If other students repeatedly jump in, impose a five-second pause between each speaker.

Getting Started

Nothing thrills me more than a spontaneous student discussion—on religion or any other topic—but most good discussions happen by design. At the beginning, certain strategies can increase the chances for a rich discussion.

- *Have a plan:* Especially on religious topics, which can touch on deep personal conviction, it helps both the instructor and the students to have a plan. The best plans (see two tried examples in the model activities) incorporate opportunities for individual reflection as well as group conversation.

- *Ask genuinely open-ended questions:* Begin the discussion with an open-ended question designed to have several plausible answers. Emphasize to students that there may be several reasonable answers to the question. (For models, see the embedded discussion and writing questions in P. Bishop, *Adventures in the Human Spirit* [Prentice Hall, 1994]).

- *Use pre-writing and peer interaction:* Provide early opportunities for students to think in writing before the discussion. Have students discuss in smaller peer groups before discussing in a whole-class setting. For models, see the model activities (attached) and also the instructor's manual to *Adventures*.

Helping Students Through

A discussion of religion can be a critical moment in our

students' intellectual and moral development. As they rethink their own beliefs, hear other students voice conflicting beliefs, and are challenged by scholarly approaches to religion, they need our support and encouragement. It's not enough to provide the intellectual challenge; we must also provide the intellectual and emotional support for them to engage these defining questions. Here are some ways:

- *Validate the diverse positions that students take:* Help students focus on the valid reasons for their personal beliefs and connect their personal beliefs to the religious and philosophical traditions of the humanities.

- *Rationalize, rationalize, rationalize:* Explain to students repeatedly the reasons that discussions in general—and discussions of religion in particular— are important. Link discussions to the goals of your course, to the students' college education, and to the challenges they will face in understanding others in the work-place, family, religious community, and elsewhere. Situate their questions and conflicts in a developmental scheme that can reassure them that progress and understanding are possible (see bibliography on moral and intellectual development).

- *Focus your own interventions on advancing their discussion:* Refuse to play the role of authority or expert; deflect direct questions back to the student group. This avoids rescuing students from fruitful moments of uncertainty or disagreement. Remind students of the ground rules and the reasons for the ground rules.

- *Ask students for reasons:* Encourage students to elaborate their opinions by asking, "What makes you think that?" and "How did you come to believe that?" Such responses help move students beyond a mode of "naked opinion" to a more considered and mature stage of rationalized thinking (again, see bibliography).

Knowing What Makes a Difference

Aside from initiating and regulating fruitful discussions, professors can make useful interventions when they demonstrate how scholars in these fields actually debate these questions. Of course, as generalists, we cannot expect ourselves to have an encyclopedic grasp of religious scholarship. So, it's best to know about a few issues that illustrate the methods of historical, textual, and philosophical inquiry into religious topics. We need to teach students (actually, to demonstrate for students) the terms of intellectual debate.

For example, I often refer to scholars' reconstructions of the life of the historical Jesus. Using the gospel accounts as well as other historical and archaeological evidence, these historians differently judge the likely deeds and sayings of Jesus. Of course, religious scholars (including Christian scholars who take the gospels as true in a revealed sense) interpret the gospel accounts differently. I focus on the criteria that scholars employ to make such judgments, and the specific terms of their agreements and disagreements. Some students will resist this kind of critical analysis, so it's important to pose these only as possible interpretations, but interpretations that meet basic standards of intellectual plausibility.

I also emphasize ethical extensions and applications of religious belief. As I say to students, the question is not just what we believe, but also, what we will do or must do because of that belief. For religious students, this kind of discussion is often immediately engaging. For non-religious students, it is often a revelation, to see their classmates' moral conviction and to be challenged to rationalize their own ethical choices in terms beyond personal preference.

Our Professional Responsibility

It seems increasingly difficult to have a sensitive and reasonable conversation about religious issues in our national dialogue. Yet spirituality is deeply rooted in our cultural traditions and our human experience.

As an educator, I feel a responsibility to promote a civil and respectful dialogue about religion, as both a personal and a historical topic. Our classrooms — where we can set clear limits and provide thoughtful support — are the best place for a national conversation about faith.

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SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Why Do the Innocent Suffer?

Write before class:
Imagine that you are a rabbi who is approached by a young couple. Their four-year-old daughter has just suffered a painful death by leukemia. They are struggling with their traditional faith in God. How would you explain their daughter's death in a world made by an all-powerful and benevolent God, without reference to an after-life? For what reasons might their daughter have died?

In groups of 3-4 people:
1. Appoint a recorder to take notes on the group's discussion and decision.
2. Share the reasons you found for this girl's death.
3. Compare your reasons to the reading in the Book of Job.
4. Try to agree on the most difficult or puzzling aspect of this problem in the Jewish and Christian traditions.

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A Truly Christian President

Write before class:
Explain in about 150 words what you think a president would do if, one day, he or she woke up determined to follow the teachings of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

In groups of 3-4 people:
1. Appoint a recorder to take notes on the group's discussion and decision.
2. Share your opinions about the likely actions of a president following the Sermon on the Mount.
3. Discuss which actions you would object to or agree with most.
4. Try to agree on the three (3) actions that a truly Christian president would most likely take.

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TEACHER TALK AND STUDENT SUCCESS

Research on verbal behavior indicates that certain verbal responses are perceived as more caring, empathetic, and understanding. According to Joe Witmer and Robert Wyrick in *The Teacher as Facilitator* (Minneapolis: Educational Media, 1989), "there is a relationship between the way a teacher is perceived by the students and the amount of self-initiated work they [students] report doing."

In other words, the way teachers talk is more than a matter of establishing rapport with students. Using facilitative responses in classroom interactions actually enhances the conditions for student achievement and success.

Most facilitative	**Focus on feelings**	*"You're feeling confused about the differences between..."* *"You're confident about the essay, but feeling anxious about the test."*
	Clarifying and summarizing	*If I understand you correctly, you're saying..."* *"Let's see, you believe ... but she's saying..."*
	Questioning	*"What makes you think that?"* *"How...?"*
	Reassuring and supporting	*"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll do all right..."*
	Analyzing and interpreting	*"The reason you dislike this painting is because..."* *"You're thinking that this character..."*
Least facilitative	**Advising and evaluating**	*"Why don't you try...?"* *"The thing to do is..."* *"If you looked at it this way, you'd see..."*

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Certain teacher responses serve to motivate and sustain classroom discussion. By using these responses, teachers shift the focus from their own expert knowledge and opinion to student thought and ideas. These responses also enhance rapport among the class and encourage the risk-taking that discussion requires.

The linking response

Links student through the teacher's observations about feeling or content, or both

"You're agreeing with Elaine that..."	(links content)
"Both of you are feeling confused about..."	(links feelings)
"All three of you are attracted by the picture's..."	(links feeling and content)

Simple acknowledgement

Provides closure to a student's statement or idea, while also recognizing the contribution.

"Thank you for sharing that..."
"All right..."
"I appreciate your telling that story."

Open questions

Open questions have several possible correct or appropriate answers, in contrast to closed questions, which direct students to a particular answer. Students feel less risk in responding to open questions and are encouraged to develop more thoughtful answers.

"What do you like most about...?"	instead of	*"Define..."*
"What can you tell us about...?"	instead of	*"What are the three causes of..."*
"What might happen if...?"	instead of	*"What happened when..."*

Focus on feelings

[See reverse side]

Clarifying and summarizing

[See reverse side]